

DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

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NATIONS MOVE CLOSER TO ELIMINATING COMMERCE AS THREAT TO ENDANGERED SPECIES

Significant progress in regulating trade in the world's wild plants and animals was made last month at a 37-nation meeting aimed at speeding implementation of an international treaty on endangered species.

The conference, held November 2-6 in Berne, Switzerland, was the first since 80 nations negotiated the Convention on the International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora in 1973. The treaty seeks to eliminate commercial trade as a cause of the decline in any species. Thirty-three nations have ratified the treaty, and 24 of those were represented at the Berne meeting. Thirteen other countries who have not yet ratified also sent observers as did many other organizations.

The meeting was hosted by Switzerland and the International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources served as Secretariat of the Convention at the request of the United Nations Environment Programme.

Many of the administrative and procedural decisions made at the meeting, along with changes in listed species, may have a wide ranging and significant impact on various interests within the United States. In addition, they also aid law enforcement and allow increased monitoring of commerce in wild plants and animals.

The changes become effective in the United States early next year when regulations implementing the treaty become final.

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--The addition of all sea turtle species which occur in U.S. waters-- as well as most foreign species--to Appendix I of the Convention (species threatened with extinction) means that sea turtle meat, skins, shells, oil, or other products can no longer be imported for activities such as the manufacture of decorative leather goods, turtleshell jewelry, and cosmetics. An exception is made for captive-bred populations.

--The addition of all rhinoceroses to Appendix I will restrict importation of these animals, including hunting trophies.

--The African elephant and all wolves, fur seals, and wild cats not already listed were placed on Appendix II of the Convention (species that may become threatened if trade is not regulated). Exports of these animals, including their pelts, ivory, or products made from them must be accompanied by documents certifying they were taken legally and that such export will not pose further threat to the species.

--The addition of all chimpanzees, lemurs, and five species of marmosets to Appendix I means that they can no longer be imported into this country for commercial purposes. All other primates not already listed were placed on Appendix II and their import into this country must be accompanied by an export permit from their country of origin.

--The glacier bear, thought by some conservationists to be a separate endangered species, was deleted from appendices on the grounds that it is but a color variation of the common black bear.

--The conference recommended that inventories be taken of endangered plant and animal specimens already in museums and herbaria to reduce demand for additional scientific specimens from the wild.

--The conference recommended that trade in wild animals as pets should gradually be restricted, and that captive breeding of animals for this purpose should be encouraged with the objective of eventually limiting pets to those species which are bred in captivity.

--The conference recognized the biological significance and vulnerability of island plants and animals and urged governments to protect such rare species and their habitats.

--The conference decided to treat all nations not party to the Convention as if they were parties and, thereby, require the same documentation. This will make law enforcement much easier and will help eliminate the problem of "laundry countries" for listed species. "Laundering" wildlife occurs when wildlife taken illegally in its country of origin is smuggled to another country which has no laws or permit requirements requiring a showing of legal export from the country of origin. Upon export from the "laundry" country, it is impossible to tell if the specimens came from another country illegally.

The Convention agreed to over 100 changes in the appendices of listed species. In addition, detailed criteria were established for listing or delisting species. Efforts were also made toward developing standardized identification aids, guidelines on the care and shipment of live specimens, and solving other legal and administrative problems.

The treaty establishes appendices of plant and animal species along with a system of regulations which are more or less restrictive, depending upon the degree to which a species is threatened with extinction and the contribution trade makes to such a threat. It controls all trade in listed species, and prohibits commercial trade in some, by requiring import and/or export permits for international movement of any listed species. Such permits are issued by an official management authority in each country and are based on findings by a scientific authority that the trade will not be detrimental to the species. The Federal Wildlife Permit Office of the Interior Department's U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the management authority for this country. The scientific authority is composed of representatives from seven Federal agencies.

The U.S. delegation, an 11-member team headed by Deputy Assistant Secretary Curtis Bohlen and composed of representatives of various Federal agencies and private conservation organizations, generally considered this first conference quite successful. Negotiations were conducted in a spirit of cooperation, unhampered by any political differences that have existed between the parties (nations sending representatives to the meeting included South Africa, Zaire, and East and West Germany). However, it was noted that few of the developing nations, the producers of wildlife, were represented.

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